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Sustaining Business Travel in a Post-Pandemic World: Factors Influencing Decisions in Asia Pacific

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ABSTRACT

International trade has been critical in supporting a country's economic growth. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the business environment dramatically. Businesses have replaced real encounters with virtual platforms. Despite the gradual reopening of international borders, some anticipate a reduction in international business travel in the post-pandemic era, while others believe that business travel will never return as businesses adapt to technology, replacing face-to-face meetings. This study aims to determine the factors influencing decision-makers when approving business travel during and after the pandemic era in the Asia-Pacific region. The six factors affecting the holdback force examined include trip alternatives, general risk, client resistance, affordability, convenience, and flight and route risks. A total of 2070 questionnaires were distributed to the corporate travel decision-makers in nine countries in the Asia Pacific region. The empirical results from the structural equation modeling (SEM) revealed that client resistance influences the holdback decision forces most. They were followed by flight and en route risk, convenience, trip alternative, affordability, and general risk. The analysis offers insight into the holdback decision factors that force corporate travel decisions in Asia Pacific.

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Introduction

Globalization has motivated international trade and air transport has been playing an important part in supporting connectivity between countries. Business travel has become important to support the global economy, allowing companies to maintain a corporate network and develop business

relationships (Derudder, Witlox, & Beaverstock, 2010). Human interaction is building the foundation of relationship development to ensure a sense of unity through sharing knowledge and reducing miscommunication and confusion between the business parties. Human interaction was claimed to be more effective compared with other strategies (Kramer, 2014). Over the last decade, technology has paved the way to replace human interactions. Human communications have been replaced by using internet applications such as video calls and video conferencing in the past decades. The speed of the replacement was accelerated further by the COVID-19 pandemic which made travel impossible in the early stages of the pandemic. Many countries have limited travel by implementing strict travel restrictions and some even close their border to non-essential travel to slow the spread of the virus. The decline in travel demand has made air travel more difficult as airlines reduced or suspended their operations. According to the result of a study by Mercer (2020), over 89% of international travel was called off in the early period during the outbreak of the pandemic. Due to the prolonged pandemic era, travelers' travel patterns and behaviors have changed. Even though air travel has returned, the cost of travel remained high. This is mainly due to reduced flight capacity, extended travel time, expensive airfare, and the need for quarantine. As a result, some people have predicted that international business travel will be reduced in the post-pandemic era and some even foreseen business travel will never return and disappeared completely (Kelleher, 2022). As per Wang et al. (2024) and Dyba & Maria (2024), organizations extensively adopted digital tools during the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain business communication in lieu of conventional business travel, with indications suggesting that this practice has continued into the post-pandemic period. Some scholars studied the changes in leisure travelers' behavior due to the pandemic (Anwari., et al, 2021; Fan., et al, 2022; Jeczmyk et al, 2023) but there remains a lack of understanding and knowledge related to the business travel sector. This study is crucial as it delves into the impact of business travel on the air transport and tourism industry, specifically focusing on the Asia Pacific region. This study expands on the work of Lin, Law & Tan (2022) by exploring post-pandemic behavioral changes among travelers and understanding the factors that impact decision-makers in authorizing business trips. Through empirical research, it aims to illuminate these factors and their implications on business travel, offering key insights to policymakers and stakeholders. This research is instrumental in informing strategic decisions and planning processes to ensure the long-term sustainability of the air transport industry, thus playing a crucial role in comprehending the changing dynamics of business travel.

1. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

According to Bunn (1993), corporate decisions on business purchases are bounded by four situational characteristics which include purchase importance (size of the purchase and/or the potential impact), task uncertainty (lack of information relevant to a decision situation), the extensiveness of the choice set (availability of alternative vendor or substitute products/services) and perceive buying power (the firm's negotiating strength in a buying decision situation). Business travel behaviors are shaped by the companies' travel policy as well as individual travelers. Cost efficiency and the level of environmental impacts are some of the major concerns to organizations (Gustafson, 2012), while ticket flexibility and the level of inflight comfort were more significant to individual business travelers (Mason, 2006; Fourie & Lubbe, 2006). However, travel behaviors have changed significantly due to the pandemic. The health measures imposed by governments to control the spread of the virus have changed air travelers' attitudes toward

international travel. The increased travel risk has made decisions on business travel more complex. These risks included employees being stranded at an undesired location due to travel restrictions, the increased insurance cost and liability to the employee, and increasing costs due to quarantine requirements (OECD, 2020; Ashenden, Doyle, & Phelps, 2021). To understand the influential factors shaping organization decisions on business travel in the post-pandemic era, Lin, Law & Tan (2022) have identified six situational factors. As shows in figure 1, the model includes Trip Alternatives (TA), General Risk (GR), Client's Resistance (CL), Affordability (AF), Convenience (CO), and Flight & Enroute Risks (FE) that would 'holdback' the organization travel decisions due to the outbreak of the pandemic. These factors were identified by the authors through qualitative research using in-depth interviews with 10 business travel decision-makers in various countries.

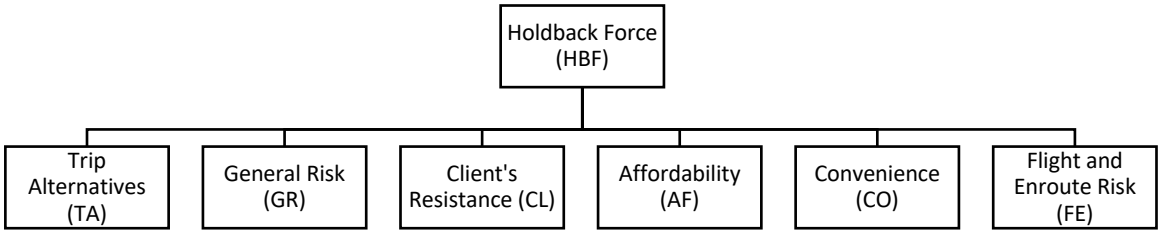

Figure 1. The conceptual model for holdback force

Trip Alternatives

Business traveling to a different branch of the company, traveling to meet suppliers or business partners, or traveling to attend conferences or business events were some of the common types of business travel (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001). The coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic (COVID-19) has made some major changes to this trend. Due to closed border policies by governments, many companies have accelerated the world into an era of digitalization. Corporations have started to adopt a remote working culture to maintain operability during the volatile pandemic (Thorp-Lancaster, 2020). This resulted in the growth of virtual platforms (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet). These virtual platforms became the primary alternative and replaced corporate travel during the pandemic era. Virtual platforms as a trip alternatively naturally became the norm as based on a Stanford University survey in 2020, 42% of employees in the United States worked from home (Wong, 2020). However, within sales-focused organizations where physical interaction is critical, the substitute of personal touch poses difficulty replicating virtually. Sales-focused organizations depend on interaction with clients through empathy and customer relationship management, which is only achieved effectively with face to face communication. According to a study by Strengers (2015), the sense of competency and gestures of the attendees in physical meets covey better messages, it also demonstrates higher respect and value compared with using telepresence facilitates. Another study by Karl, Peluchette, & Aghakhani (2021) has identified some major problems with virtual work meeting which includes camera and microphone issues, eating, meeting management issues, and work-from-home issues. As companies have gotten used to hosting virtual meetings during the pandemic, therefore this study hypothesizes that: H.1. Trip alternatives significantly influence the holdback force on business travel decisions.

General Risks

With mandatory safety requirements imposed by the pandemic, corporate travel is also highly subjective on the perceived risk of traveling. This involves the mandatory vaccination required in most countries for entry to be exempted from quarantine measures. Vaccination acceptance rates vary from country to country due to concerns and perceived risks. In countries such as Kuwait, it poses a challenge for businesses to conduct any traveling during the pandemic when employees are not willing to be vaccinated (Sallam, 2021). The requirement of insurance for COVID-19 has also been a risk for companies to bear, which would be a requirement for travel. The additional layer of risk, financially and medically, critically affects how corporate travel policy defines essential travel during the pandemic. Similarly, where organizations are afraid of allowing employees to travel due to the additional risks involved, employees are just as equally apprehensive about traveling during the pandemic. This can be due to various reasons, such as the COVID-19 situation in the destination country or their perception of risk. As the pandemic evolves through multiple variants and countries constantly tighten border controls, this level of uncertainty is reflected in fear of traveling and opting for safe alternatives (Nanni & Ulqinaku, 2020). The study of Gupta et al., (2001) has revealed a positive correlation between the perceived risk associated with COVID-19 and travel avoidance among Indian tourists. Similar findings were also revealed by Sengel et al. (2022) that the pandemic directly affected the travelers' intention to travel and visit different destinations due to the health risk involved. In a survey on confidence in attending exhibitions or business conferences, vaccination and low COVID-19 cases are ranked as top of mind by business travel planners in the US (Curley et al., 2020). As a result, this study hypothesizes that: H.2. General travel risks significantly influence the holdback force on business travel decisions.

1.1 Client's Resistance

Companies that have interactions with clients will be affected by their demands and are likely to have their travel decisions influenced due to the pandemic. Even though meeting with clients was routine for many businesses, the pandemic has changed the traveling trend dramatically. As face-to-face interaction was the main channel for transmitting the COVID virus (and with governments promoting social distancing by limiting face-to-face interaction, many businesses have turned down face-to-face meetings and moved to online format even when there were no travel restrictions enforced by some countries (Pizam, 2021). Meeting face-to-face has made the company staff and clients generate discomfort feeling due to the increased risk of being exposed to the virus (May et al., 2021). According to Berry et al. (2020), the pandemic has made critical relationship changes between entrepreneurs and decreased contact has led to a wave of increased separability in which clients refused physical meetings. Lannarino (2013) suggested that there were other reasons why the client refused to meet, including meetings bringing no value and there was too much preparation work to set up the meetings. This study hypothesizes that: H.3. Client's resistance to meet significantly influences the holdback force on business travel decisions.

Affordability

Corporate travel has increased as businesses seek to improve in-person interaction and engagement among employees and clients in geographically separated locations. The Covid-19 epidemic, on the other hand, has halted corporate travel, with most US-based corporations cutting travel costs by 90% or more starting in early 2020 (Caputo et al., 2021). The cost of conducting online meetings and business deals with clients and customers is significantly less than traveling during the pandemic, which incurs costs like testing and quarantine. The limited number of flights operating, and the quarantine policies enforced by respective governments required a longer travel time to

the destinations (Eliasson, 2022), which increases the travel budget of companies. For example, the epidemic has added the cost of quarantine to the typical travel expenses for travelers who arrive in Singapore during the pandemic. The travelers were charged more than SGD$2000 for a 14-day booking quarantine hotel and multiple Polymerase Chain Reaction Test (PCR) tests (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 2021). This can influence corporate travel policymakers' decisions about the types of business activity which require physical meetings, and which do not. As a result, this study hypothesizes that: H.4 Affordability significantly influences the holdback force on business travel decisions.

Convenience

During the pandemic, almost every other country responded to safe traveling measures by introducing travel restrictions such as travel bans, arrival quarantines, and health certificate requirements (Gössling et al., 2020). This has put a lot of pressure on air transport service providers. Airlines were scaling down their operations, grounding aircraft, and laying off employees (Law & Katekaew, 2022). These have added inconvenience to air travelers where there are limited airline choices and routing options. Additionally, the increased travel obstacle including the requirement of quarantine; pre-departure and post-arrival tests have created barriers to travel needs (Khatib et al., 2020). Despite industry efforts to restore international mobility, travel policies may vary when new variants develop and travel restrictions may be restored (World Travel & Tourism Council & McKinsey & Company, 2021). Governments have opened the borders and allowed vaccinated travelers to travel without quarantine with rising vaccination rates. However, airlines are facing problems of labor shortage due to the massive layoff during the pandemic. This has resulted in flight cancellations and delays (Westbrook, 2022). The restoration of flight frequencies back in the pre-pandemic period has become a major challenge to airlines. As a result, these have continued to impact corporate travel policy decisions as variants of the COVID-19 virus impede travel restrictions across countries as well as the availability of flights. These will inevitably impede travel convenience. This study furthers the hypothesizes that: H.5 Convenience significantly influences the holdback force on business travel decisions.

Flight & Enroute Risks

In-flight transmission of COVID-19 has been a growing concern of risks associated with business travelers (Pombal et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2021). As passengers are in an enclosed cabin, the likelihood of transmission becomes higher (Guo et al., 2022). The results of previous studies have shown that COVID-19 may be transmitted during a flight and the passenger seated in the middle row of economy class is bearing a higher risk. Cases have been reported of COVID-19 cases contracted during a long-haul flights despite being more than two seats away with safe distancing measures (Khahn et al., 2020). This is despite flights with empty seats between passengers being twice as unlikely for any transmission to occur in-flight (Barnett & Fleming, 2020). With air travel posing a high risk, many governments have implemented mandatory COVID-19 Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) testing before their flight to ensure safe travel (World Travel & Tourism Council & McKinsey & Company, 2021). Air travelers on connecting flights at connecting airports were also claimed to be bearing higher exposure risk. The study by Haider et al. (2020) has defined those direct flights contributed to a lower risk of COVID-19 transmission in international travel. However, with the airlines scaling back their operation during the pandemic, the availability of direct flights was limited. As a result, we hypothesizes that: H.6 Flight and enroute risks significantly influence the holdback force on business travel decisions.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

To recognize the influential factors shaping the organization's decision in the post-pandemic era in the Asia Pacific region, this study uses structured self-administrated questionnaires to assess the hypothesis generated. The usage of a structured self-administrated questionnaire gave confidence to the respondents by assuring anonymity and flexibility in giving accurate and honest responses (Marcano., et al, 2015). The measurement scales of the study were created based on the factors recommended by Lin, Law & Tan (2022). The questionnaire questions were in the 5 points Likert scale format from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) as it suggested to have higher response rate and eased the frustration emotion of the respondents (Babakus & Mangold, 1992; Sachdev & Verma, 2004).

The questionnaire included four sections, the first section includes three screening questions to ensure the respondents are the decision-makers of business travel of their organizations, the staff of the organizations have needs to travel overseas by air for business purposes, and the organizations are located in the nine selected countries (i.e., Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand) in the Asia Pacific Region. These countries were ranked as the top nine countries in the Asia Pacific by Cushman & Wakefield's Data Center Risk Index for strong network infrastructure, diverse connectivity to major Asia Pacific markets, political stability and pro-business policies (Marketing- Interactive, 2017). The second section consists of questions related to the respondents' job titles and company backgrounds. The third section consists of questions related to the company's travel pattern and the purpose of the business trip. The fourth part covered the holdback factors of corporate travel due to the pandemic identified in the previous study. The factors consist of 7 (seven) items for trip alternatives (TA), 5 (five) items for general risks (GR), 4 (four) items for client's resistance (CL), 4 (four) items for affordability (AF), 5 (five) items for convenience (CO), and 4 (four) items for flight & enroute risks (FE). The questionnaire was translated from English into seven other languages (i.e. Chinese, Hindi, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Malay and Thai) by professional translators to increase the response rates. Minor amendments were made based on the result of the pre-test for a better understanding of the questions.

Data Collection

According to Kline (2011), a sampling size of at least 200 samples is recommended for structural equation modeling studies. Other studies recommended that 10 observations per parameter are an adequate sampling size (Bentler & Chou, 1987; Hair et al., 2014). A total of 2070 questionnaires were distributed in 9 (nine) countries in the Asia Pacific region to the corporate travel decision makers. These companies are in Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. The stratified random sampling method was applied by focusing on the corporate travel decision makers. A total of 1948 questionnaires were useful and used for further analysis with a usable response rate of 94.10%. The collected data are entered in the Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) program version 23 and the SPSS's Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS) program version 23 was used to build the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) for further analyses. Table 1 shows the details of the questionnaires distributed and the response rate in each country.

Table 1. Respondents rate.

Country	Questionnaire Version	Number of distributed questionnaires	Useable responses	Valid response rate
Australia	English	230	223	96.95%
China	Chinese/English	230	219	95.21%
India	Hindi/English	230	221	96.08%
Indonesia	Indonesian/English	230	211	91.73%
Japan	Japanese/English	230	210	91.30%
Korea	Korean/English	230	211	91.73%
Malaysia	Malay/English	230	216	93.91%
Singapore	English	230	216	93.91%
Thailand	Thai/English	230	221	96.08%
	Total	2070	1948	94.10%

Model

The structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach is used to construct the holdback factor (HBF) latent variable related to the identified holdback forces. Structural equation modeling is a statistical technique used to measure and analyze relationships between observed and latent variables. The technique is widely used in social and behavioral sciences studies (Bollen & Noble, 2011). SEMs are made up of two components model: [1] the latent variable model that describes the relationship between endogenous and latent exogenous variables, and the evaluation of both direction and strength of the causal effects among these variables; [2] the measurement model that describes the relationship between latent and observed variables (Gunzler et al., 2013; Kirby & Bollen, 2009). The measurement items on holdback decisions are based on the six exogenous holdback forces listed in Figure 1. The Cronbach's alpha, average variance extracted (AVE) and Composite reliability coefficient (CR) were used to measure the reliability of the model. Recommended by Nunnally (1978), Cronbach's alpha is used to validate the measurement model to determine the internal consistency and reliability of the instruments. The rule of thumb of Cronbach's alpha is 0.70 or above is deemed acceptable (Taber, 2017; Schrepp, 2020). In addition, to measure the convergence validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability coefficient (CR) was used to reflect the quality of the measures. An AVE of 0.50 or above and CR of 0.70 or above were considered acceptable ranges (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). To further test for model fitting, Hair et al, (2014) recommended the assessment of relative/normed chi-square (x2/*df*), root means squared error of approximation (RMSEA), and goodness-of-fit statistic (GFI) indexes indicating how close the fit of the data is to the population. The satisfactory threshold of the P-value of the relative/normed chi-square ($x^2|df$) is less than 0.05; the RMSEA is within the range

between 0.05 to 0.08 and the GFI is 0.9 or above (Shadfar & Malekmohammadi, 2013; Kline, 2011; Wheaton et al., 1977).

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the profile of the respondents. Most respondents held a middle management position in the company (41%), and this is followed by senior management (32%). Concerning the company size, most companies have more than 300 local employees (31%) and 50 or less and 51 to 100 share the same percentage (20%). Most of the respondents are from the accountancy, banking, finance, or insurance sectors followed by the computing, information technology, and telecommunication sectors, and the manufacturing sector (10%).

Table 2. Profile of respondents.

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Job Position	Senior Management	627	32.18%
	Middle Management	794	40.75%
	Entry Level	253	12.98%
	Analyst/Associate	274	14.06%
Locally based employees	50 or less	387	19.86%
	51-100	396	20.32%
	101-200	343	17.60%
	201-300	266	13.65%
	more than 300	596	30.59%
Industries	Accountancy, banking, finance or insurance	214	10.98%
	Advertising, marketing, PR	102	5.23%
	Agriculture or Fishing	34	1.74%
	Arts, cultural, entertainment and recreation	70	3.59%
	Building, construction, property or real estate	115	5.90%
	Business, consultancy or management	130	6.67%
	Chemical, oil or plastics	39	2.00%
	Computing, information technology and telecommunication	201	10.31%
	Defence, public services or administration	33	1.69%
	Education	112	5.74%
	Electronic, engineering, machinery and equipment	91	4.67%

Energy and utilities	37	1.89%
Environment and forestry	7	0.35%
Events, hospitality. leisure, tourism and sport	53	2.72%
Food and beverages, food production or restaurant	80	4.10%
Healthcare and social services	62	3.18%
International trade, retail or wholesales	104	5.33%
Law and legal services	21	1.07%
Logistics, storage and transportation	43	2.20%
Manufacturing	200	10.26%
Media	21	10.78%
Mining and quarrying	10	0.51%
Pharmaceutical	19	0.97%
PR advertising, marketing, PR	5	0.25%
Science and technology research	40	0.20%
Others	105	0.53%

Table 3 shows the result of the reliability and validity analysis which includes the result of Cronbach's alpha, average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability coefficient (CR). The Cronbach's alpha result in table 4 shows all measuring items were above 0.70, which demonstrates the overall instrument had acceptable reliability. In addition, the CR and AVE of all items were above 0.7 and 0.50 respectively with statistically significant at P <0.001. These have indicated adequate convergences and validity of the six constructs in the model.

Table 3. Reliability and validity analysis.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha
Trip Alternatives (TA)				0.94
• Compared to pre-COVID-19, to what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding the decisions about overseas business trips of your organization after borders reopen?	2.78	1.301	0.88	
• We will replace overseas business trips with virtual platforms (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meets, etc.) as	2.88	1.268	0.84	

long as suitable platforms are available.				
• We will replace overseas business trips with virtual platforms as virtual platforms will be able to connect people at the same level of personal touch as physical meetings.	2.87	1.278	0.86	
• We will replace overseas business trips with virtual platforms as personal touch is not perceived as essential as pre-COVID-19.	2.82	1.259	0.84	
• We will replace overseas business trips with virtual platforms as virtual platforms will be able to achieve the same purposes.	2.86	1.240	0.85	
• We will replace overseas business trips with virtual platforms due to lower cost.	2.88	1.198	0.72	
• We will replace overseas business trips with virtual platforms as people have gotten used to communicating via virtual platforms.	2.88	1.251	0.81	
General Risk (GR)				0.93
• We will not travel on overseas business trips if vaccination is not mandatory for all travellers.	2.84	1.300	0.85	
• We will not travel to the intended overseas destinations if new COVID-19 cases at the destinations are high.	2.83	1.365	0.88	
• We will not travel to the intended overseas destination if they are popular amongst travellers from countries with high number of COVID-19 cases.	2.85	1.311	0.87	
• We will not travel on overseas business trips if our staff perceives travel as unsafe.	2.88	1.300	0.87	
• We will reduce our overseas business trips if COVID-19 related travel insurance is not available.	2.83	1.258	0.84	
Client's Resistance (CL)				0.88
• We will travel on overseas business trips based on the requests from our clients or collaborating parties.	2.87	1.252	0.84	
• We will reduce travel on overseas business trips if we have stable relationships with our clients or	2.88	1.225	0.84	

collaborating parties.				
• We will reduce our overseas business trips as we anticipate our clients or collaborating parties will not feel comfortable to meet physically.	2.88	1.179	0.75	
• We will travel on overseas business trips as meeting face-to-face with clients or collaborating parties is the normal practice by our competitors.	2.82	1.246	0.73	
Affordability (AF)				0.91
• We will reduce our overseas business trips due to the monetary expenses of quarantine.	2.89	1.180	0.83	
• We will reduce the annual travel budget within one year after borders reopen.	2.87	1.215	0.85	
• We will reduce our overseas business trips after borders reopen as we anticipate worsening economies relative to pre-COVID-19.	2.87	1.212	0.84	
• We will reduce our overseas business trips if the associated costs of travel (e.g., airfare, hotel, etc.) increase.	2.90	1.183	0.87	
Convenience (CO)				0.91
• We will reduce our overseas business trips if the frequency of flights to the intended destinations decreases compared to pre-COVID-19.	2.87	1.190	0.79	
• We will reduce our overseas business trips if additional travel documents are required due to COVID-19.	2.85	1.205	0.84	
• We will reduce our overseas business trips due to the quarantine requirements.	2.85	1.233	0.86	
• We will reduce our overseas business trips due to the anxieties about sudden changes to travel restrictions.	2.86	1.257	0.87	
Flight and Enroute Risk (FN)				0.91
• We will reduce our overseas business trips due to the anxieties about sudden changes in quarantine policy.	2.85	1.194	0.81	
• We will reduce business trips to the intended overseas destinations if non-stop flights are not available.	2.84	1.206	0.84	
• We will reduce business trips to the intended overseas destinations if flights	2.85	1.230	0.87	

are expected to be packed.			
• We will reduce overseas business trips due to the anxieties about staff being exposed to other passengers in an enclosed flight cabin.	2.82	1.293	0.85

Table 4. Inter-construct correlations.

		CR	AVE	TA	GR	CL	AF	CO	FE
1	TA	0.939	0.688						
2	GR	0.935	0.741	0.903***					
3	CL	0.877	0.640	0.974***	0.944***				
4	AF	0.900	0.692	0.909***	0.871***	0.942***			
5	CO	0.907	0.708	0.914***	0.908***	0.939***	0.946***		
6	FE	0.905	0.706	0.917***	0.951***	0.949***	0.937***	0.968***	
***									

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (two-tailed)

Based on the adequate convergences and validity of the measuring model, a structural model was developed to analyze the influence factor of the variables to the holdback decision. The model has demonstrated good fit based on the result of the relative/normed chi-square (x^2/df) = 0.000, RMSEA = 0.055 and GFI indexes = 0.913 as per Table 5.

Table 5. Goodness-of-Fit indexes for the Measurement model and Structural model.

Suggested fitting measures	Recommended value	Measurement model	Structural model
Relative/normal chi-square (X^2/df)	P<0.05	0.000	0.000
Root means square error of approximation (RMSEA)	0.05-0.08	0.051	0.055
Goodness-of-fit statistic (GFI) indexes	>0.90	0.922	0.913

The structural model results shows in Figure 2 and Table 6 suggested that the client's resistance has the highest influence on the holdback decision (standardized beta = 0.987), followed by flight and enroute risk (standardized beta = 0.981), convenience (standardized beta = 0.969), trip alternative (standardized beta = 0.954), affordability (standardized beta = 0.953) and general risk

(standardized beta = 0.947). The P-value of each factor indicated that the structural paths were statistically significant, which demonstrated that all the hypotheses in the study are supported.

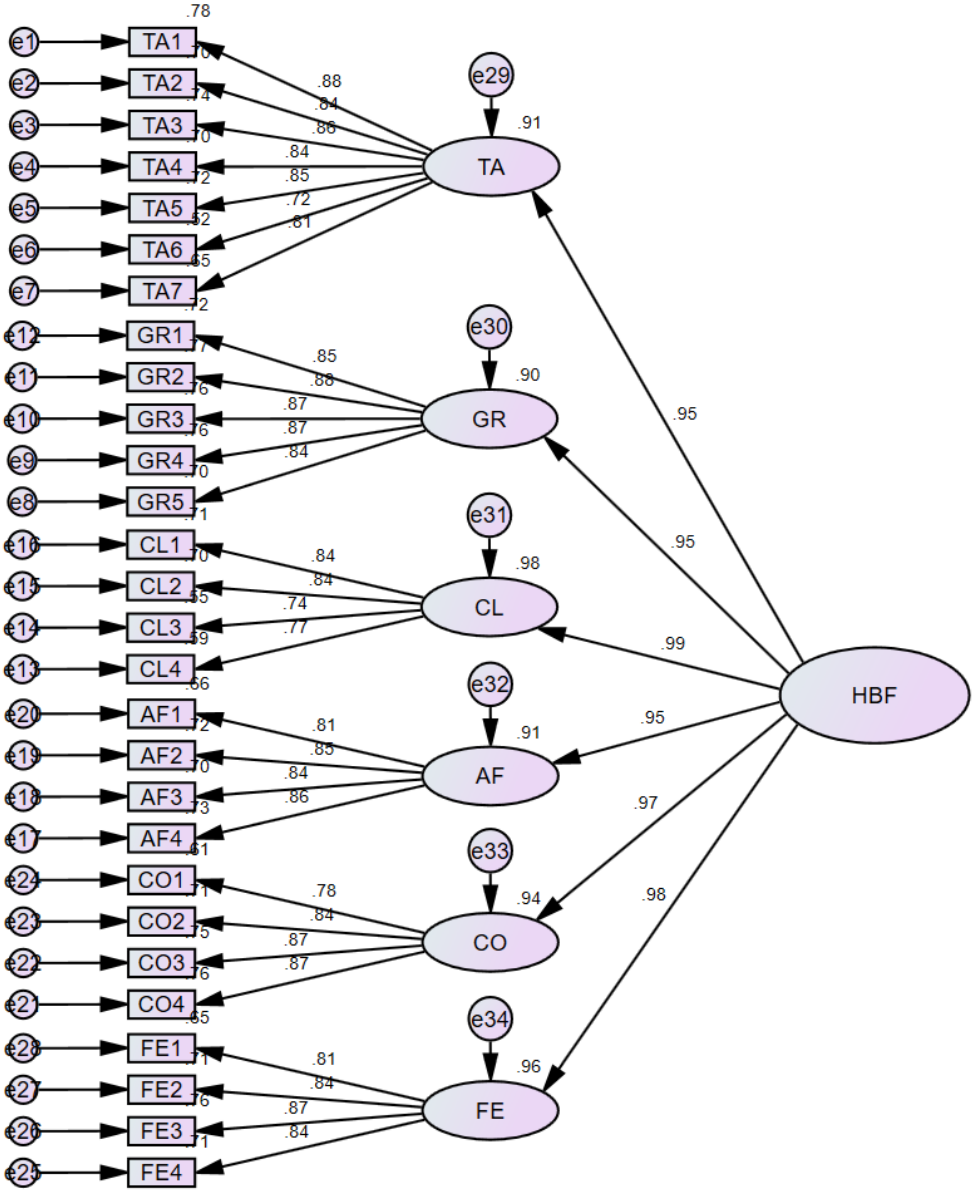

Figure 2. The structural model

Table 6. Structural Model Result (Path coefficients/Standardized regression weights).

Structural Path	Standardize Coefficients	t Value	P Value	Squared multiple correlations
Holdback Force → Trip Alternatives (TA)	0.954	46.952	***	0.909

Holdback Force → General Risk (GR)	0.947	43.029	***	0.896
Holdback Force → Client's Resistance (CL)	0.987	39.814	***	0.975
Holdback Force → Affordability (AF)	0.953	44.501	***	0.908
Holdback Force → Convenience (CO)	0.969	46.000	***	0.938
Holdback Force → Flight and Enroute Risk (FE)	0.981	46.952	***	0.961

*** statistically significant level P<0.001.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

International trade has been playing an important role in a country's economy. Not only related to the movement of goods, but international trade also supports a country's job market, improving the living standard and driving economic growth. International trade involved substantial human interactions, which is one of the key strategies supporting the success of most businesses today. Human interaction helps businesses to build personal relationships and trust, leading to a social glue mechanism between business partners. The study by Coscia et al., (2020) has defined that business travel closely correlates to economic growth and recommends authorities reconsider the visa regimes and support the transport infrastructure. However, the 2019 COVID has caused a re-think. Border closure, increasing travel formalities and quarantine requirements have made international travel more difficult. Many organizations have shifted to a remote working model and physical business meetings were converted to online platforms. Asia Pacific's economy was heavily affected by the pandemic leading to an increase in the unemployment rate increased and the level of poverty (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

In the post-pandemic era, after the border reopens, governments are using different strategies to bring back tourists. According to the result of the survey study by Morning Consult, the leisure travel rebound rate is much quicker than business travel and many business travelers have no plan returning the business travel pattern compared to the pre-pandemic era (Roeschke, 2022). The studies conducted by Wang et al. (2024) and Dyba & Maria (2024) illustrate a pattern of continuous technology integration and a decline in business travel in the post-pandemic period. Consequently, it is crucial to comprehend the factors influencing these strategic choices.

The findings in this study indicated that all proposed hypotheses are strongly supported. The holdback decision of business travel decisions is influenced by the identified factors including trip alternatives, general risk, client's resistance, affordability, convenience, and flight & enroute risks. This study has identified that client's resistance, flight and enroute risk and convenience as the three top factors holding back organizations' business travel decisions followed by trip alternatives, affordability, and general risk. Of significance, the result has demonstrated that the holdback forces of business travels were significantly influenced by the clients' refusal to meet which was not mentioned in any previous studies. This is clearly a priority placed on societal well-being in response to the transmission of the virus. Many of these studies were focusing on the enroute risk by examining the chances of getting infected in the enclosed aircraft cabin environment (Sharun et al., 2020; Neuburger & Egger, 2020) and the affordability of the company (Adinolfi et al., 2021; Dube et al., 2021).

Flight and enroute risk is another factor that significantly influences the organizations' business travel holdback decision. The risk of infection on the flight is another concern to many air travelers. The respondents do not feel comfortable traveling on a full flight, and they are also concerned about the sudden changes in quarantine policy issued by the respective authorities. Airlines and airports have been working hard to implement different strategies to rebuild air travelers' confidence. These strategies included the implementation of hygiene and sanitation policies to protect the staff and the passengers (Suk & Kim, 2021) and investing in touchless technology to minimize physical contact (Amankwah-Amoah, 2021). In addition, cabin interior designers and researchers are working together to propose new seating arrangements in aircraft cabins. (Moerland-Masic et al., 2021) suggested that the use of zic-zac seating layout, individual design, and offset seating to segregate passengers on the flight helps to reduce the infection risk. The inconvenience created by international travel was ranked third among the measuring variables in the study. The level of convenience was affected by the need to make multiple stops to get to the destination and limited flight time choices due to the lack of available flights. In addition, the extra time required to prepare for the trip such as, taking pre-departure PCR tests and applying for arrival permits was affecting the business travel intention of the corporate travelers. The result of the study is aligned with the study of Gustafson (2012) and Nenern et al., (2020) where the authors defined that convenience is somewhat important to business travelers. Schedule convenience was one of the key factors for airline choice for business travelers. A study from Egencia (2018) reveals that business travelers considered that convenient travel time and the availability of direct flights were more important than comfort. As some of these requirements are gradually removed by the authorities and as the airlines relaunch their flights, the level of inconvenience is reducing. Airlines were offering flexible ticketing policies aimed at bringing back air travelers. Complementary rebooking and refund without penalty allow travelers to make changes to their travel plan, which gives more flexibility and control to the passengers, which is especially important for business travelers. The trip alternative is another factor influencing the holdback decisions of corporate travel decision-makers. It is somewhat surprising that it is not ranked as the most influential variable affecting the holdback factor as we have predicted. The result of this study has defined that the respondents considered that using the virtual platform can replace physical meetings, they believed that using the virtual platform will be able to connect people at the same level of personal touch. More importantly, due to the extended duration of the pandemic era, businesses are already accustomed to communicating via virtual platforms. In addition, hiring local employees was considered by businesses as an option for travel. According to Good Search, a recruiting company in the US, local hiring is becoming important with COVID-19. Many companies were considering hiring local staff in the intended overseas destinations due to staff being reluctant to fly and resistant to relocation (Bradford, 2021). Hiring local staff or outsourcing also gives the advantage of the local language and market knowledge, which are beneficial for the organization. The affordability factor is also significantly influencing the holdback decision of businesses when planning business travels. Rising prices of air tickets and accommodation; and the cost of quarantine were some major concerns to organizations. Based on the article published by BBC interviewing multiple travel specialists, companies are likely to reduce their corporate travel budget as they see that remote work setup is effective for their organization. Even though some business meetings cannot be avoided, these meetings are likely to combine into one trip to minimize travel costs (Frost, 2020). General risk is also demonstrated as a significant influence on the holdback decisions of corporate travel for organizations in the Asia Pacific. The respondents were concerned about the safety of their employees, employees were also reluctant to travel to

destinations with high Covid cases. One of the major concerns is that business travelers fear themselves or their family members getting infected especially after a trip (Gajić et al., 2021).

This study provides insight into the holdback decision factors of corporate travel decision-makers in the Asia Pacific market. Air service operators, including the airlines and airports; and policymakers can use the results of this study to develop marketing strategies to strengthen and re-establish the confidence level of business travelers towards air travel. The motivation for the return of air travel in the post-pandemic era will thereby increase economic activities in the country as well as social benefits to society.

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